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A LOOK AT CITIZEN-ADVISORY COMMITTEES

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a brief overview of citizen advisory committees and their interaction in public schools. The history of this interaction, types of committees, and problems that have arisen in advisory committees are explored.

A LOOK AT CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEES

Citizen Advisory Committees are an established and integral component of our schools and school systems. This article takes a brief overview of advisory committee history, types of committees, roles and function of committees, and problems that have arisen in advisory committee performances.

HISTORY

Davies (1978:21) has indicated that advisory committees had a very fast development from the late forties through the early 1950's. However during the late 1950's, advisory committees seemed to begin a dormant stage. It was not until the Civil Rights movement and the War on Poverty that renewed attention focused again on citizen advisory committees.

As a result of the Civil Rights movement and the War on Poverty in the 1960's, a series of legislative acts by both the state and federal governments gave new impetus to advisory committees by mandating their activities or existence. Advisory committees were created with legislative authority as result of the anti-poverty effort, specifically through requirements in Head Start and Follow Through Programs, and then in Title I of the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Davies, 1978:21). As a result of this renewed emphasis, it was found in a survey conducted in the early 1970's entitled Education U.S.A. that less than five percent of the school districts have not had, and did not have, a citizen committee (Oldham, 1973:5-7).

In 1972, legislation in California linked school advisory committees to the early childhood education programs. In 1973, the Florida legislation

mandated school advisory committees, either at the district or building level. In 1977, South Carolina followed the same pattern by passing a law requiring local school advisory committees. State and federal legislation was most prevalent in career education and vocational education, with the Education Amendments of 1976 being the most encompassing since they required advisory committees for all vocational education programs (Cochran, 1980:xiii).

When parent groups were organized in the mid-1960's, there was a general assumption that all was known that needed to be known in order to provide quality programs and that sufficient dollars would provide the services that children needed. However, less was known than needed to be known about the problem, and the situation continues today (Hagerty, 1978:85).

Hagerty found that the quality of services provided for handicapped children has depended upon three basic factors: local administrative leadership, local parent advisory groups, and local taxable wealth. School districts which had all three of these factors working in their favor were able to provide quality services for their handicapped population. Conversely, districts which substantially lacked these three factors were limited to provide anything but the most minimal services for their children with handicaps. The importance of citizen advisory committees was further underlined in a study by Wilkens and Callahan when they stated that "we have yet to visit one local school system which refuses to provide basic special education services in the face of well-organized and widespread parent pressure on behalf of better services" (Hagerty, 1978:43-45).

Many boards have actively solicited opinions of local citizens by appointment advisory committees. No governing board of manageable size has claimed every point of view in the community is represented by its members;

not have they claimed a monopoly on ideas for making the college responsive to the community. Advisory committees have been a means for extending the board's "antennae" into the community, and for multiplying the opportunities for interaction between the college and its constituency (Zoglin, 1976:29).

Types of Advisory Committees

Several authors have discussed the various types of advisory committees and have pointed to various roles and functions which advisory committees have been either permanent or temporary, the former have been used for programs requiring continuing surveillance and updating (vocational, recreational, multicultural), the latter have been useful for meeting specific, nonrecurring needs (financial crises, problems with neighbors, changing district boundaries). The strength of the board's desire for community involvement has been determined by the number and caliber of its advisory groups. If they were few in number and "packed" with known college supporters, with friends of trustees and staff, their advice was predictable and comfortable. If they were numerous, and included representatives picked by the many different interest groups and organizations in the community, their advice would be unpredictable and even unpleasant, but it tended to reflect the thinking of the general public. An extension of the advisory committee approach was to invite citizens to become involved with college staff and trustees on a continuing basis. This system was known as "participatory planning" or "participatory management" (Zoglin, 1976:29-30).

Historically, according to Oldham, there have been basically two types of advisory committees. The first was a district-wide committee dealing with major educational issues of administration, organization, curriculum,

Advisory Committees

instruction, or community relations. The second was the individual school building committee which often served as a mechanism to assist the administration with specific tasks. Their contributions have usually been kept to a minimum. Recently, a third category of citizen committees has emerged and has been stimulated by requirements of federal programs, notably Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Vocational Education Act (VEA) (Oldham, 1973:7).

However, Davies pointed to two major categories of advisory committees. The first category was a citizen-initiated committee organized by citizens themselves and typically operating independently of the school or school system. The second category was a mandated committee which was formed by action of (1) a local school or school system (a formal or informal mandate); or (2) by state or federal legislative, executive, or judicial action (Davies, 1978:13).

For comparison purposes, Cochran concluded that

advisory committees can be grouped into one of the six major types: (1) schoolwide advisory committee, (2) administrative advisory committee, (3) general advisory committee, (4) departmental advisory committee, (5) program advisory committee, and (6) special purpose advisory committee (Cochran, 1980:47).

On the other hand, Davies stated that

citizen-initiated or mandated groups can be classified according to the following auspices or affiliations:

1. Independent. Single organization or coalitions of organizations not formally a part of a school, school system, or government agency.
2. Federated. Local voluntary organizations that are a part of a regional, state, or national federation (e.g., League of Women Voters, Urban League).
3. School-based. Groups that are directly affiliated with or a part of a school system.

In addition, Davies classified school-based committees into the following three categories:

1. School-related to a single school building or site or a cluster of two schools or three related school buildings or sites.
2. Area-related to a subdistrict, zone, or area of a school district.
3. Citywide or county or school districtwide.

Davies further indicated that, "until recently, citywide councils were the predominant mode. Since the early 1970's, however, federal, state, and local mandates have stressed building level councils" (Davies, 1978:14-15). This study has examined state mandated school-based citizen advisory committees located on a single campus.

Roles and Functions of Citizen Advisory Committees

Advisory committees have been distinct from other groups in that they are composed primarily of volunteers and serve totally in an advisory role. For the most part, they have functioned outside the formal structure, but at the same time have a direct impact on that structure. From an operational perspective, the advisory committee has been like any other managerial group, depending on the same key concepts of organizing, operating, planning, and evaluating (Cochran, 1980:223). Another role definition of an advisory committee was

a group composed primarily of individuals outside the educational profession who are selected from segments of the community collectively to advise educational personnel regarding one or more educational programs or aspects of a program (Cochran, 1980:4).

Cochran stated that "the primary purpose of an advisory committee is just that--one of providing advice. The committee has no administrative or

legislative authority, nor does it in any way take away rights and/or privileges of the school staff" (Cochran, 1980:6). Cochran pointed to seven roles which were most common to advisory committees. They were the roles of: (1) providing assessment and review, (2) being a change agent, (3) being a communication link, (4) setting directions, (5) inputting for legislation, (6) determining needs, and (7) providing service (Cochran, 1980:30-33).

Acting within the context of the above roles of goals of advisory committees, Cochran pointed to the following seven areas where the majority of the committees functioned: (1) curriculum content advisement, (2) equipment, facilities, and instructional resources review, (3) community resource coordination, (4) career guidance and placement services, (5) program evaluation, (6) community public relations, and (7) professional development (Cochran, 1980:33-34).

Similarly, James Cox classified the functions of advisory committees into the following categories: (1) fact finding, (2) planning, (3) coordinating and communicating, (4) activating of new resources, and (5) evaluating (Cox, 1974:30). Davies has generally divided the activities of advisory committees into two categories: school-related issues and council-related issues. The following chart further defined the various categories of activities in which advisory committees engage:

School-related issues

1. Critical organizational issues (budget, personnel, curriculum/program).
2. Planning and evaluation issues (information acquisition, needs assessment, goal setting, evaluation, etc.).

Council-related issues

1. Council organization and structure (membership, by-laws, meetings, etc.).
2. Council resources and support (staff, funds, workshop, etc.).

School-related issues

Council-related issues

3. School climate (discipline, rights and responsibilities, building conditions, etc.).

4. Extra educational issues (transportation and safety, extra-curricular, field trips).

5. School/community relations, public relations, fund raising). (Davies, 1978:41-42).

There has been agreement with the general role and functions of advisory committees, however, one study found an area where advisory committees should not deal. A research project which questioned a large, random-sample of administrators in California found an overwhelming support for parent involvement--when advisory committees fulfilled their advisory charge and kept clear of the decision-making responsibilities reserved for the principal. There were two issues, however, where California administrators felt parents should not tread: (1) determining how the local school budget should be allocated, and (2) evaluating personnel in the school (Olivero, 1977:2).

Problems of Advisory Committees

In spite of the increase in the number of advisory committees, their role has seemed to be confused and unclear. In an early study, O'Neal found that the goals and functions of certain advisory committees were often unclear and fraught with problems. He found that citizen committees were generally successful in achieving their objectives, however, the committees usually have experienced some difficulties in their operations.

O'Neal (1961), in his unpublished dissertation, did an extensive study of 678 school districts in New York of which 546 replies were received. The study covered the status, structure, and functions of citizen advisory

committees. His study revealed some interesting findings.

1. Citizens advisory committees were found extensively in New York state and their activities were significant for school administration. The fact that there were 222 active citizens groups during one given year. . . means that one out of every three schools in the state had a committee during that year.

2. Committees were found more frequently in districts with populations over 10,000. Of the 158 districts with a population of 10,000 or more, 87 percent had a citizens committee. By contrast, only 47 percent of those communities with populations under 5,000 had a committee.

3. The specific-purpose, board-sponsored citizen's committee were the predominant type in New York. The median length of operation for the specific committees was eight months while the median for continuing committees were nearly two years.

4. The great majority of citizen committee activities centered around building programs and bond issues.

5. Citizen committees as a group were generally successful in achieving their objectives.

a. A great majority of citizen committees, approximately 72 percent, were rated as either excellent or above average on a five-point scale by both administrators and citizen committee chairmen.

b. Chairmen and administrators alike reported that school-community relations had either been improved or greatly improved as a result of the committee activities in 80 percent of the cases. Eighty-five

percent of the chairmen and administrators indicated that they would recommend that their boards of education continue to sponsor citizen groups.

- c. Eight citizen groups recommended centralization (consolidation of school districts) during 1957-58. Seven of them passed. Only one failed.
- d. Other tangible evidence of success were: (1) 17 committees recommended curriculum changes which were made, (2) 15 recommended new policies which were adopted, and (3) five recommended new salary scales which were accepted.

6. Advisory committees experienced some difficulties in their operations. The problem most frequently mentioned as the chief difficulty experienced by the committee in the order of importance were: (1) most of the work of the committee was left to be done by a few; (2) membership was not truly representative of the entire school district; (3) membership became divided into factions; and (4) the committee was not given, or it did not take, enough time to do the job well (O'Neal, 1961:29-30).

Many years later, Davies stated that "the council idea has not been implemented satisfactorily. Many policy makers and political observers are disappointed that such councils have thus far failed to make a strong contribution to the development of participatory democracy at the grassroots level" (Davies, 1978:7). For support of this statement, Davies pointed to the Eighth Annual Gallup Poll on Public Attitude which found that only 10 percent of those queried were unwilling to serve on a citizen advisory council at their local school. The remaining 90 percent who indicated interest listed the

following educational policy areas as those most in need of citizen deliberation: (1) discipline, (2) student-teacher relations, (3) career education, (4) student dropouts, (5) teacher evaluation, (6) the programs for handicapped students, (7) educational costs and finance, (8) the school program, and (9) education for citizenship (Davies, 1978:7). These identified needs could serve as future goals or functions of citizen advisory councils.

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Other studies point to similar problems. One such study was conducted by the National Schools Public Relations Association and entitled Education U.S.A. It reported problems encountered in working with advisory committees. The most frequent complaints were:

1. The apathy of members (loss of interest, poor attendance, difficulty maintaining a high degree of involvement),
2. The mechanics of scheduling times and places when everyone can

meet,

3. The amount of time involved,
4. The domination of committee by a few individuals or by "pressure groups,"
5. The role definition of members--ensuring committees don't overstep their authority. On the other hand, most committees say they don't want to be mere rubber stamps
6. The committee membership reflecting a cross-section of the community,
7. The problem of sticking to the point, and keeping discussion productive (not going off on irrelevant personal, or trivial tangents),
8. The problem of finding qualified and willing members,
9. The need for steady communication, keeping members informed, and training them,
10. The unworkable, unrealistic recommendations or requests (Oldham, 1973:14).

Further studies by the Institute for Responsive Education indicated that current policies mandating council lined many inconsistencies and flaws. Three problems which particularly affected school administration were (1) lack of ownership, (2) role overload, and (3) role confusion (Davies, 1980: 64). Administrators who were assigned to implement a committee often felt a lack of ownership since they were not involved in the policy and planning stages of committee development. The administrator also had several mandates for committees and often felt a role overload. Last, many mandates were often vague and unclear, resulting in role confusion as to what exactly were the responsibilities, authority, and functions of the committee.

Bowser pointed to seven disadvantages voiced by educators regarding advisory committees. They were:

1. Community involvement was a time-consuming endeavor.
2. Community groups became unwieldy. They were difficult to control. In most cases, they lost interest and did not follow through on projects.
3. Community groups were costly to maintain and it was difficult to get involvement from a cross-section of citizens.
4. Community groups became "vested interest" groups and even attempted to become "super school boards."
5. Community persons were not interested in what happened at the school, therefore, only the interested people got involved. Community advisory groups seldom included the people who should have been concerned.
6. Community groups had a problem finding a proper time and place to meet.
7. Community groups usually had an "axe to grind" with a particular person or group in the school (Bowser, 1976:2).

In a study conducted by Allen Fisher of some 140 advisory committee members serving various levels of administration in the seven largest county districts in Florida, it was found that "members of advisory committees say they are not involved in budgeting or staff evaluation, and they seldom succeeded in getting other changes made." He indicated that

too many school authorities treat advisory bodies with virtual indifference. Simply opening the door, apparently, is not enough. Educators must take the extra step of providing advisory bodies with training appropriate to their areas of expected involvement. It is apparent that advisory committees have not been used as Florida intended, and they have not performed as well as many hoped. The failure was, in a sense, built into the system that created them (Fisher, 1979: 254-355).

Davies stated that "school councils have high potential as mechanisms for citizen participation, even though this potential has yet to be realized" (Davies, 1978:11). He believed that

despite the new organization and impressive statistics, little power has been transferred to parents and citizens. School superintendents continue to dominate school boards. Professionals and school boards resist sharing power with other parents and citizens (Davies, 1978:3).

Blumenburg stated

for better or worse, the principal is the key. Successes or failures seem to hinge on three areas--all irrevocably tied into his definition of the situation. First, how he perceives and applies the community advisory notion, second, his acceptance of the process as part of the product, and third, his willingness to accept a new role (Blumenburg, 1971:60).

However, perhaps the least known quality in the governance equation has been the general public. Zoglin stated that there have been indications that this group will awaken and assert control over public education at all levels. Scholarly journals have debated the importance of lay control of schools, newspapers, and magazines increasingly carry articles on the topic, and citizen groups have organized to translate theory into practice (Zoglin, 1976:160).

DISCUSSION

Much literature has been devoted to ideas and suggestions on how best to organize and operate citizen advisory committees. However, McMillan (1974:20) concluded that "...there is no singular formula for an effective school community advisory council. Each school's community council is somewhat different in terms of its composition." Reports on the effectiveness of advisory committees also leads to varying conclusions (Bennett, 1974 and Zerchykov, 1980).

The future of citizen advisory committees is somewhat ambiguous. Zoglin (1976:160) believes that the growing bureaucratization of the school may stifle all attempts at citizen participation and involvement. The growing transfer of power and funds away from local control to state and national agencies may make it impossible for citizens to influence their schools. Frustration, apathy and alienation may result (Zoglin, 1976:160). People seem to be moving away from working within the school advisory committees to outside groups intent on influencing school decisions. Because of these trends, it is imperative for schools to enhance and develop effective citizen advisory committees.

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